

The Brown Toadlet *Pseudophryne bibronii*: a story of survival

The Brown Toadlet *Pseudophryne bibronii* (also known as Bibron's Toadlet) is a small, secretive frog that inhabits grassland, woodlands and dry forest over a wide area of north-eastern, central and western Victoria. Males of the species call from depressions or low-lying areas during and after rain from February to June. The call is a short, grating 'cre-ek' uttered every few seconds (Hero *et al.* 1991).

The Brown Toadlet is one of a number of species that relies on autumn rain for breeding. However, over recent years, with a marked reduction in rainfall, records for the species have declined significantly and the Brown Toadlet is now considered vulnerable in Victoria.

Between April 2000 and March 2002, the Fauna Survey Group of the FNCV conducted a survey of vertebrate fauna of the Black Range, near Stawell in western Victoria (Homan 2005). On the first visit to the district the group camped at the Stawell Park Caravan Park, beside Pleasant Creek, about five kilometres south of Stawell. Many of the people who attended that first trip had recently completed a frog identification course. We were therefore very keen to put newly acquired frog-finding skills into practice and so at night we searched for frogs along the creek and in nearby paddocks and woodland. Directly over the creek from the caravan park was a low-lying paddock, with thick grass and several depressions, perfect habitat for the Brown Toadlet. The paddock was also adjacent to a wide roadside verge of remnant woodland.

As we crossed the creek we could hear male toadlets calling from the depressions in the paddock, and after much effort, we succeeded in locating and capturing several. Some of us were familiar with the species from club trips to Rushworth Forest, but for most members it was the first time they had heard or seen the Brown Toadlet.

Since the Black Range survey finished early in 2002, the Stawell district has been in the grip of severe drought and, whilst I have visited the district many times since, none of my visits coincided with rain, especially during autumn. However, I had

arranged to visit friends in Stawell on the last weekend in April 2007 and, luckily, substantial rain fell across the district on the Friday and Saturday. My partner, Maryrose Morgan, and I arrived in Stawell late in the afternoon of Sunday 29 April 2007, to find wet roads and roadside puddles. Shortly after dark we drove down the track to Pleasant Creek and walked the 20 m through the woodland roadside verge to the paddock where we had found Brown Toadlets exactly seven years previously.

We stood motionless beside the boundary fence and scanned the paddock with torches and waited in the dark hoping to hear toadlets calling. However, the drought had taken a heavy toll and the once lush paddock was now almost bare dirt, with virtually no grass cover at all – not good habitat for the Brown Toadlet. We were about to leave when, directly behind us from within the roadside verge, came the grating 'cre-ek' of a male Brown Toadlet. Very soon another toadlet called from further along the verge and then another. Each one was calling from wet depressions filled with a thick layer of leaves, bark and twigs tangled amongst Finger Rush *Juncus subsecundus* in the remnant woodland.

In recent years there has been much bad news concerning declining frog populations around the world. It is therefore very pleasing to know that, despite one of the most severe droughts on record, at least one population of a wonderful little toadlet has survived in western Victoria. The experience also reinforced the value of roadside verges, which often provide important remnant habitat, particularly in agricultural districts.

References

- Hero J, Littlejohn M and Marantelli G (1991) *Frogwatch Field Guide to Victorian Frogs* (Department of Conservation & Environment, Victoria)
- Homan, P (2005). A survey of the vertebrate fauna of the Black Range, near Stawell, Victoria. *The Victorian Naturalist* 122 (2), 94-102.

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